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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 RIYADH 001417

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/ARP, OES/STC
DEPARTMENT PASS TO HHS

E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: [TBIO](#) [SENV](#) [ECON](#) [SCUL](#) [PREL](#) [SA](#)
SUBJECT: SAUDI HEALTH MINISTER LAUDS CDC, CALLS FOR BROADER
COOPERATION WITH U.S.

REF: RIYADH 1045

¶1. (SBU) Summary: The Saudi Minister of Health is very pleased with ongoing cooperation with the U.S. Center for Disease Control (CDC), which is working on a three-stage program to protect the health of Hajj visitors and improve the Kingdom's ability to track and respond to outbreaks of infection (e.g., H1N1). The Minister hopes that Saudi Arabia can build on this cooperation to conclude a broader MOU with the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), which will also help the Kingdom improve its ability to conduct leading edge medical research. The Minister also put in a strong pitch for increased medical and administrative training in the United States, which he said is important in maintaining political ties. End Summary.

CDC Cooperation:

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¶2. (SBU) On October 20, Saudi Minister of Health Dr. Abdullah Al-Rabeeah thanked Ambassador Smith for the strong bilateral cooperation with the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) to prepare for the onset of the Hajj and the challenge of guarding against outbreaks of infectious diseases, particularly H1N1. There will be two CDC experts in Riyadh, three in Jeddah, and four more coming as Hajj gets under way.

The minister was particularly appreciative of mobile medical surveillance systems, which will be piloted in Makkah during the Hajj and expanded across the country afterward. This will give the Ministry a much clearer picture of who is getting infected and what their symptoms are, which will allow it to make more informed decisions to mitigate the spread of infectious diseases.

¶3. (SBU) The CDC project has three phases: to pilot; fine-tune; and deploy a 21st century disease surveillance system for use during the Hajj and beyond. For the first time, the national communication base and hospitals will be using the same platform, employing cutting-edge technology. This system will be deployable to other countries, and will offer bilingual information for doctors.

H1N1:

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¶4. (SBU) Al-Rabeeah was cautiously optimistic that the Kingdom was prepared to carry out the Hajj without a serious outbreak of H1N1. He noted that, in many ways, Ramadan was a tougher test, as it takes place over a longer period of time and people tend to concentrate in close proximity for longer periods of time during evenings, compared to Hajj. Al-Rabeeah was satisfied with the relatively low outbreak level during Ramadan (local papers report 47 people contracted H1N1 during Ramadan). Al-Rabeeah expressed

concern that some developing countries may not have sufficient capacity to protect their pilgrims. To cope with this eventuality, Saudi Arabia has assembled a team of its own specialist doctors, working with CDC units and 45 private doctors specialized in critical care and infectious diseases.

They have also set up several additional critical care units, and distributed diagnostic kits and medicines to four separate labs in Makkah and Jeddah.

15. (SBU) Al-Rabeeah said the Ministry is working to set up a medical research center in Makkah (King Abdullah Medical City), which will focus on Hajj-related diseases with the goal of devising guidelines to prevent future infections, in part by mapping the sources of various diseases. As an interim step, the Kingdom has set up regional knowledge centers that coordinate weekly with the Ministry's headquarters to monitor health threats. The Ministry is expanding a system the Minister initially set up in the Saudi Arabian National Guard.

Research a Priority:

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16. (SBU) Al-Rabeeah said the King is particularly keen to improve U.S.-Saudi health collaboration. In that regard, the Minister said it was very important to conclude an MOU with HHS that included cooperation with the NIH and CDC. Al-Rabeeah is actively seeking research partnerships with international institutions, which is important in improving the Kingdom's long-term capacity to manage public health challenges. The Kingdom is opening more research facilities, such as the King Abdullah Medical Research Center in Makkah

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and a large laboratory in Riyadh, which will be finished within a year. Al-Rabeeah stressed the importance of partnering with U.S. institutions to ensure that Saudi researchers were adequately trained.

17. (SBU) Saudi Arabia's needs are immense, as the government is building 117 hospitals and 1,040 primary health care centers. Al-Rabeeah lamented that Saudi Arabia lacks sufficient manpower to staff these facilities, both on the medical and administrative sides. The minister noted that, 30 years ago, most Saudis received training in the United States. This has atrophied over the years and now more than 300 Saudi doctors are trained in France and Canada each year, compared to just 9 in the U.S. He noted that there is a strong link in Saudi Arabia between political and medical culture, and stressed that he wants as many Saudi health professionals as possible to get medical and administrative training in the United States.

Women's Health:

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18. (SBU) Al-Rabeeah is dedicating significant time to improve women's health in Saudi Arabia, particularly on prevention and early diagnosis of diseases such as breast cancer. He is placing greater emphasis on primary health centers, ensuring that they all have child and maternal health units. Al-Rabeeah noted that he recently appointed the Ministry's first female Director General, in charge of nursing.

Reform:

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19. (SBU) Al-Rabeeah noted his ministry has been working hard over the last six months with Harvard University on a proposal to reform the Saudi health care system, and he and his senior deputies recently presented a strategy to the King. If it is approved, the minister said he will look to U.S. institutions to help Saudi Arabia realize its ambitious plans. Medical centers in Detroit and Cleveland have invited Health Ministry officials to upcoming conferences, which may lead to partnership agreements. (Note: Delos

Cosgrove, the CEO of Cleveland Clinic, will participate in the Global Competitiveness Forum in Jeddah, January 23-26.
End note)

Bio Note:

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110. (SBU) Al-Rabeeah still maintains his clinical practice, centered on child and maternal health. He also spends significant time delivering lectures, including upcoming events in Germany and Switzerland. He was previously the Chief Operating Officer at the Saudi Arabian National Guard's Health Agency, where he focused on instituting programs to improve health surveillance as a means to prevent the outbreak of disease among Saudi troops. He speaks fluent English.

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